

The Death of Virtue and the Rise of Expertise

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Features
12.20.2019
American Mind

America must educate a new elite worthy of the name.

In “[Losing the Class](#),” Ian Marcus Corbin makes a vital point studiously and willfully ignored by those in charge of American society: an enormous generational gap is growing between the ideology of the ruling class and the inner thoughts of the younger generation. In his words, “our students are playing the game like good little Party members, but they don’t believe the doctrine.”

What he notes next describes perhaps the single most unsettling reality I routinely observe from my own (unique and privileged) position observing America’s political and intellectual scene. Like Corbin, “I don’t know that revolution is coming tomorrow,” but “whatever you expect for a massive, demanding, expensive institution that has lost—for a whole generation—the hearts and minds of its constituents, long-term stability isn’t it.”

The institution Corbin refers to is higher education, but he may as well have been referring to American government, if not America itself. Despite protests to the contrary, which arise because our educational system is so desiccated, most people’s understanding of American government and America is still profoundly influenced by their formal education, whether they admit it or not.

Even if one disagrees with or is apathetic about what one hears in the classroom, it not only blocks one’s view of whatever the truth *may* be but shapes the very framework by which you understand what the truth *could* be. By ignoring the deep and vital wells of western political philosophy and preaching that America is irredeemably flawed and evil, the educational system obstructs and prevents the very understanding of America and politics that could potentially re-found and re-form our country back to civilizational health.

Ersatz Education

Corbin’s point is applicable to the young inclining to both the Right and the Left, and the same unstable dynamic between young and old he sees in education can be equally applied to our current political parties, legacy think-tanks, and the business and professional world.

Despite the real and well publicized problem of “bias” and Social Justice Warriors on campus, Corbin says “elite universities are not hotbeds of radical sentiment.” Rather, they have long been “incubators for obedient career-seekers” in an increasingly oligarchic America. Insofar as such students encounter the usual radical and bullying multiculturalist orthodoxy of such campuses, Corbin plausibly suggests that many

students today are merely mouthing the required words.

It will always be the case that most real learning takes place with one's peers outside the classroom, but in a healthy educational institution this means further discussing required readings and arguing about the discussions that occurred in class. What Corbin is talking about is something very different. The reigning orthodoxy has become so stale that students are beginning to create, join, and seek out "a subterranean culture where you can talk, read, explore, or laugh at ideas that can't be examined in class."

By refusing to engage or acknowledge substantial areas of real concern to the young, American elites are unwittingly setting the nation up for more fundamental and sudden breaks in the current order. That order is busy arguing about Trump, but Trump or no Trump *they have no viable succession plan*. They cannot transmit "establishment" teachings to the youth.

The more they repeat the old mantras to the kids, the more mainstream institutions and figures fail, whether they try to court the likes of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Trumpian New Right or attempt to ignore them.

Of course, another part of the problem today is not meritocratic at all: we have passed the point where a large part of the citizenry has little-to-no idea of the history or basic operation of the regime form in which they live. But Americans don't need to know basic civics to know that they shouldn't trust their ruling class.

Since 2015, confidence in higher education has fallen [faster than anything else on Gallup's list](#)—including Congress, the Presidency, banks, and newspapers. Just under half of Americans now trust higher education. And a majority of Americans think higher education is [headed in the wrong direction](#).

Since they no longer trust our educational institutions, the American people increasingly reject the kinds of leaders we have busily minted with shiny credentials over the last several decades. Our educational system can no longer systematically produce or *legitimize* the kinds of elites that the populace is willing to follow.

In the mind of a growing majority of the public, our supposed meritocracy rewards those to whom its rewards are not truly due. Our educational institutions bestow ever more degrees, on ever more graduates, that command *decreasing* authority and respect.

The upshot is that if you look at America over the last few years and think the volatility is too high and the rate of change too fast, I have bad news for you: this is only the beginning.

At The American Mind we think we should welcome the possibility for much-needed and drastic change. Our current failing order desperately needs reformation. But the blindness and apathy of those in charge to the growing generational ideological divide is recklessly and needlessly ensuring more division and discontinuity than we have experienced thus far.

The Generational Gap Is Real

Most elite students are still career climbers, of course. But while the extent to which the party of the ruling class has lost the youth may be open to debate, intelligent young human beings of goodwill universally desire to ask real and open ended questions and discuss possible answers. They will inevitably find ways to do so on their own in spite of the stifling dogmas of America's institutions of higher education.

In the past, however, these dogmas were reinforced by all the power of our cultural institutions. To take one obvious example, Obama's staffers psychologically prepped themselves for work by watching NBC's *The West Wing*—a touchstone they still

reverently invoke in their memoirs of their showlike time in the White House. In the era of lengthy TV series that digital technology made possible, *The West Wing* turned into Netflix's *House of Cards*—and then the digital #MeToo movement ended its star's career.

Few of the young watch network TV now. They are being formed in an era in which all televisual content including “news” has been subsumed into the online medium, meaning they live in an environment outside the control and focusing power TV once had.

In the meantime, our civic and cultural institutions have fast continued their long decline. Those in their sixties and older, even as they promote and celebrate the breakdown of the family, still benefit from growing up in a radically different more traditional culture with two parents who stayed together. It is, and let me underscore this, *extremely difficult* for older generations to *even imagine* what it would be like to actually grow up in the schools and culture they formed.

When it comes to the rising generation, as I have [written](#), the “increasing recognition that our ruling class’s understanding of politics is inadequate to resolve the political strife of our era—and may instead be causing it—is resulting in a corresponding dissatisfaction with the very form or structure of our political system.”

While the “aging baby boomers running our unpopular and unsuccessful civic and social institutions struggle to understand the discontent swirling around them...bright young people on the Right and the Left speak of regime change. Surveying the current state of American politics, they fault the principles of American government as they understand them, quietly but firmly consider sweeping measures for change, and rally around alternative accounts and forms of government.”

All of which helps to explain why radical and cynical elite sub-groups of all kinds, on Right and Left, are proliferating online and in private digital chats across America.

This is no longer a mere *academic* problem. The question of elite education is now a “regime-level” problem.

How Did We Get Here?

The use of the word “elite” [proliferated in print](#) in the latter half of the 20th century, and is now a common pejorative. Yet as the poet and critic T.S. Eliot noted in an essay on culture in 1948, within western democracies, the “doctrine of elites” was originally meant with the best of intentions.

Most Americans would still agree in principle that, as Eliot [put it](#), “all positions in society should be occupied by those who are best fitted” to their position. The idea was that, as opposed to the injustices of class-based societies, a large democratic public and private education system would identify potential talent, higher education would give the talented expert knowledge, and then they would be swept up into the positions they were best suited for.

Populist or not, almost everyone would admit that our nation needs better *leaders* in nearly every area of our society, and any nation will ultimately perish if it cannot produce them. Whether we are talking about those who lead in the military, finance, education, or politics, we want “elites” in place in the sense that they are actually elite or excellent at their job.

In other words, the problem isn’t the *existence* of elites: rather, one of the central problems of human political life is choosing and shaping *the right kind* of elites.

The cause of the problem goes far deeper than the “woke” ideology of the modern

American campus. In the middle of the last century, Eliot worried about the supposed meritocracy that we were already well on our way toward building.

A meritocracy seeking out raw talent is not, in principle, a problem. The problem, rather, lies in how we put that ability to use. There were some sensible reasons for many of the changes over the last century, and certainly many of them have been effective in various respects, but what we were selecting elites *for* became less clear as a new elite caste consisting of managerial, scientific, and financial roles emerged over the last century.

First, Eliot worried that it may not select the right people (see also Rob Koon's excellent article "[T.S. Eliot, Populist](#)" in *First Things*).

After all, everything depends upon the standards we use to select the elite, yet even in order to select such standards we first need to determine what are we choosing our elite *for*. And herein lies our very deep rooted problem. As recent Yale graduate Natalia Dashan [makes clear](#), both here at The American Mind this week and in her [article](#) for *Palladium* earlier this year, higher education can no longer easily give a clear account of its purpose.

To understand why, one must look back to the roots of the modern campus during the transformation of American education that occurred in the late 19th century. The American Mind will explore the relevance and depth of this transformation—and what might be done to build anew—throughout the coming year.

In this week's Feature, Pavlos Papadopoulos, a bright light at an [intriguing new college](#), gives us [a thumbnail sketch](#) of that momentous change. As he says, "this 19th-century transformation of elite education prefigured, even midwived, the 20th-century transformation of the American regime. The emergence and political victory of the Progressives, and the administrative state that they came to construct and staff, was aided decisively by the decline of classical liberal education and the republican political order it helped maintain."

Papadopoulos cites the work of Claremont Senior Fellow John Marini, who rightly [argues](#) that over the last century and a half America developed a system in which "the legitimacy of politics and law—its cognitive and moral foundation—rest upon the authority of the intellectual elites. If there is any objective ground for that authority, it is thought to be established by rational, scientific knowledge."

The so-called "social" *sciences* have long since replaced theology, philosophy, and the traditional study of politics and history. As Marini says in another [essay](#), "Although a meritocracy has become part of the mass culture required and imposed by a technological order, it is not the same as the natural aristocracy that is compatible with liberal democracy and liberal education as originally understood."

In early America elite education's purpose was in large part to create religious, educational, and political or legal leaders. The founding generation did not take the SAT or GRE to gain entry into elite colleges, but demonstrated an ability to translate classic texts from Greek and Latin to English, and vice versa. This not only was a sign of general intelligence and basic discipline but was also useful for incoming students to engage in mostly required general classes and few if any electives. These classes included ample readings in the classics, but not for historical purposes: they thought that studying ancient politics and history and statesmanship would prepare one for political and civic life.

Over the last century and a half, riding the wave of the industrial revolution and the imported model of the German research university, we began to build a selection

process that uses very different standards than that of the American founding era: standardized testing and a variety of “metrics” easily applicable to large masses of people, all of which claimed to measure skills and “raw” talent rather than “content knowledge,” as educators now call “the stuff you actually learn”.

In truth, SAT and ACT scores now stand as proxy for raw intellectual ability. The pseudonymous teacher known as Spotted Toad, whose [Twitter account](#) is often provocative, perceptive, and thoughtful, [puts it this way](#): “The history of the last 50 years is the history of one group of people using slightly hidden proxies for intelligence tests to shape who they live near, work with, are served by, and send their kids to school with. That’s meritocracy.”

But the content of education changed accordingly. As Papadopoulos notes, Charles Eliot, President of Harvard for 40 years (1869-1909), introduced the elective system to Harvard undergraduate education amidst the Industrial Revolution, helping transform what was left of the required thread of centuries of western religious and classical liberal arts education for elites into the modern research university. This led historian Samuel Eliot Morison to lament: “It is a hard saying, but Mr. Eliot, more than any other man, is responsible for the greatest educational crime of the century against American youth—depriving him of his classical heritage.”

This heritage was intended to be the basis upon which our nation’s leaders would be molded towards political life in the service of their nation. But as the shared understanding of statesmanship and its corresponding virtues, themselves based on a shared understanding of human nature, eroded over the last century and a half, what made one “elite” in America became ever less about the excellence of virtue and ever more about the excellence of expertise.

From Elite to Elites

This change blurred the formerly shared purpose of elite education. To take but one example, the top universities in America didn’t give up the practice of required chapel attendance and group prayer until the early part of the last century, and not simply for religious reasons.

As Russell Nieli says in his wonderful [short history of American education](#), “Arthur Hadley...who in 1899 became Yale’s first non-clergyman president, resisted the growing tendency of his era to make chapel attendance optional on the grounds that optional attendance would ‘[interfere] with the coherence of the student body.’”

This sort of required religious observance is unthinkable today even in most conservative religious educational institutions. The disappearance of this sort of *social cohesion* based upon an education unified and ordered towards civic service might have led to T.S. Eliot’s most trenchant [remark](#) at mid-century about the creation of our meritocracy: the doctrine of elites, he said, “posits an *atomic* view of society” in which the elite is “composed of individuals who find their way into it solely for their individual pre-eminence”.

Eliot worried that in the meritocratic system, students would “be united only by their common interests, and separated by everything else.” The elite, in other words, “will consist solely of individuals whose only common bond will be their professional interest.”

And this is precisely the real fear of many Americans today. If there is not a unified ruling class view of morality or religion, but in fact a rejection of the same, nor a unified elite culture educated to love and serve America, what is there to unite the elites but raw self-interest? What is to prevent them from putting their own good above everyone else’s?

Unmade Souls

There is obviously plenty of justifiable criticism one could lodge against the White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture of the last century, as empty as it often was, feeding off the fumes of a more serious educational era. But say what you will about WASP culture—at least it had a public service ethos. One was supposed to use one's increasingly technocratic expertise in the service of one's country.

But in the absence of the shared understanding of the early republic concerning what human nature—and therefore politics and America—is and ought to be, a public service ethos of technocratic expertise was not enough. Along the way leftism became ever more powerful, leading ultimately to the replacement of the Christian religion with the closely observed rituals of guilt and penance of today's Social Justice Warriors.

This loss of purpose has now run its course. We are reaching the final chapter of a long, slow *reductio ad absurdum*. The problem of elites now concerns not only questions of curriculum but basic competence. Nature abhors a vacuum. Mis- or haphazardly educated students unable to bear the pain of offensive Halloween costumes will not gain the consent of the governed.

The culmination of the orthodoxy of liberalism in intersectional, multiculturalist political correctness is tired and (yes) shrill in the eyes and ears of many students who have grown up in the digital age, but they play along because they have no other institutionally protected options. But as [Corbin](#) and [Dashan](#) suggest, a “common bond” in mere careerism is also not enough to fulfill the deeper promise of education, nor the longing of students for shared meaning and purpose.

It is unfair to simply blame and condemn the students, most of whom are not radicals. They have been profoundly affected by radical changes in culture and education in ways that their elders do not understand. The ease with which elite universities and colleges have adopted their rigid orthodoxy without student complaint is likely in part caused by the fact that most students *are* in real pain. As pseudonymous political theory professor Jerry Gibbon [tells us](#) this week, students “are confused, disordered, stuck in an arrested childhood, and often in extreme emotional pain.”

Education is meant to form more than the mind. Nor do our minds exist in a vat. The idea that one can produce leaders through technocratic or procedural knowledge alone is false, of course. Leadership *requires* a certain formation of character. Our unwillingness to pronounce standards and guardrails for the sake of deep and long-lasting happiness when it comes to sexual and other human behaviors—our broken families—does not form character, or strengthen the psyche. Instead, we harm and destroy it. Our society systematically unforms, unshapes, and unmakes young people.

As Gibbon [points out](#), “the very possibility of higher education depends on a prior cultivation of character, of emotional discipline, of healthy and stable habits of heart and mind. If we can't protect the young from cynicism and inculcate in them decent (if not noble) thoughts and feelings, we'll deprive ourselves of much more than the next generation of philosophers, artists and intellectuals.” Surveying the failing credentialed landscape, it looks to me, as he suggests, that we are rapidly approaching the point at which we “find ourselves without leaders in *any* field.”

Where there is lack of vision, people perish. If one does not buy “woke” ideology, and mere careerism is not enough for your soul, what are you left with in America's educational institutions? You are, as Dashan [indicates](#), left completely adrift.

Gibbon wisely suggests the problem begins much earlier than the fall each year when damaged souls arrive at college. Their hollow, outward conformity and lack of inner

respect for institutional authority begins early these days. The K-12 school system doesn't allow for real leadership, Gibbon argues. We would need to eliminate the constraints of bureaucratic uniformity in administrations and student bodies alike in order to restore true authority and judgement bound by honor.

But when one examines the K-12 system, such reform seems impossible. After Spotted Toad explains the disastrous results of the contradictory urges of the upper middle class and the wealthy when it comes to K-12 education, he [concludes](#): "If the last fifty years have sent a simple, coded message to parents—'Don't send your kids to school with the poor!'—perhaps the next decade will send another kind of message—'Don't send your kids to school with the rich, their parents are nuts.'"

Reform Must Be Real

If we do not begin to directly address the problem of forming the leaders we need, America will accelerate uncontrollably toward further balkanization and decline.

One of the theses that seniors had to argue at Yale in 1797 in order to graduate was that "without virtue and literature no republic can exist happy and free. In order that citizens be gifted with virtue and intelligence it is necessary that they be instructed in letters and good morals; therefore, such institutions being neglected, a free and happy republic can no longer exist."

I do not intend to suggest that it is possible or even desirable to perfectly recreate the education of the founding generation of American. Our present circumstances demand something different. Further, American education's decline are not merely the result of evil, error, or ignorance—hard problems demanding tough tradeoffs arose between the founding generation and our time that present us with a radically different set of circumstances.

Nonetheless, the task before us will require such institutions fitted for our time, not just getting rid of politically correct speech codes on campuses that have long since lost a clear sense of purpose. We must not seek to create an "alternative" elite system of education. We must and we will create an *actual* elite system of education. We must create, guide, and encourage institutions that instill an *understanding* of American principles and purposes and a corresponding *love* for what this country is and can become.

But if we are to have any hope of successfully doing so, we will have to allow space for hard, honest discussions with a generation that is increasingly giving up on the American regime as presently constituted. We will have to bypass much of the current educational order and its institutions, or completely remake them. They are intrinsically outmoded, and deep in denial.

Increasingly, if the conservative movement and its donors wish to have any salutary influence on the future elites who might re-found and thereby save America, they will have to put time, money, and action in the service of much bolder thought and action than they have in the past 70 years.

The Claremont Institute's Fellowship programs for elite young leaders that I direct ([applications are now open](#)) *should not have to exist*. The reason they exist is because of the shameful failure of the system to teach what it ought. But all is not lost. Applications to programs such as ours are growing as students realize this failure and seek alternatives. There is a small but [growing](#) renaissance afoot, both looking to retrieve what has been lost and to remake education for the future, and there are increasingly popular tides to support it. We are making plans to greatly expand our own programs soon.

Any true remedy for the corruption of our civic life needs to transcend a laundry list of policy prescriptions or even the applied force of law: we must *re-form* an elite culture. To Make America Great Again, one must Make Elites Great Again: one must MEGA to MAGA.

*This article is based in part on the 2019 [Commencement Address](#) Dr. Peterson delivered at Providence College.

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